

## Rhinoceration Process in *Rhinoceros* by Eugène Ionesco

Eugène Ionesco'nun *Gergedanlar* Oyununda Gergedanlaşma

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## **Rhinocerisation Process in *Rhinoceros* by Eugène Ionesco<sup>1</sup>**

**Emrah ATASOY**

### **Abstract**

*Rhinoceros* by Eugène Ionesco (1959) presents the gradual literal and metaphorical transformation process of characters into rhinoceroses under the strong influence of the dominant ideology throughout the play. Ionesco's play discusses and highlights the significance of maintaining one's own individuality instead of mere adherence to a manipulative ideology through the struggle of the main character, Berenger. Berenger is in this respect different than other characters who adopt the represented ideology that does not tolerate plurality and diversity of opinions. The more characters turn into rhinoceroses, the stronger Berenger's feeling of solitude and loneliness gets, which increases his alienation from his society. This study will in this regard give brief relevant information about the Theatre of the Absurd; then briefly introduce Eugène Ionesco as a playwright; and finally discuss the literal and metaphorical transformation process of the characters into rhinoceroses, which stands for the gradual loss of their individuality with specific references from the primary source and relevant secondary sources.

**Keywords:** *Rhinoceros*, Rhinocerisation, Transformation, Theatre of the Absurd, Eugène Ionesco

## **Eugène Ionesco'nun *Gergedanlar* Oyununda Gergedanlaşma**

### **Süreci**

### **Özet**

Eugène Ionesco'nun 1959 tarihli *Gergedanlar* adlı oyunu, eser boyunca baskın ideolojinin etkisi ile karakterlerin gerçek ve metaforik anlamlarda gergedanlara dönüşme sürecini aktarmaktadır. Ionesco'nun metni, baskın düşünce yapısının bir parçası olmaya direnen ana karakter Berenger'in mücadelesi aracılığıyla manipülatif bir ideolojiye körü körüne bağlanmaktan ziyade bireyselliğin ve bireysel özellikleri korumanın önemini vurgulamakta ve tartışmaktadır. Ana karakter Berenger, düşünce farklılığını ve zenginliğini hoş görmeyen baskın ideolojiyi benimseyen diğer karakterlerden bu anlamda farklıdır. Eser boyunca, daha fazla karakter gergedanlara dönüştükçe, Berenger'in yalnızlık hissi de bu duruma bağlı olarak artmaktadır. Böylesi bir durum, adı geçen karakterin toplumundan daha çok soyutlanmasına ve uzaklaşmasına neden olmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışmada öncelikle absürt tiyatro hakkında konu ile alakalı kısa bilgi verilecek, daha sonra Eugène Ionesco bir oyun yazarı olarak kısaca tanıtılacak ve sonuç olarak karakterlerin gergedanlara dönüşme süreci ele alınacaktır. Bireyselliğin aşamalı olarak kaybı anlamına gelen bu süreç, birincil kaynağa ve konu ile alakalı ikincil kaynaklara yapılan göndermeler üzerinden ortaya konacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Gergedanlar*, Gergedanlaşma, Dönüşüm, Absürt Tiyatro, Eugène Ionesco

<sup>1</sup> This article is the revised and expanded version of the paper presented at the conference: "Four-Footed Actors: Live Animals on the Stage," 12-14 Dec. 2012, organised by the University of Valencia, Spain.

### Introduction

Eugène Ionesco, the Romanian-French playwright, presents characters who are blindly adhered to a dominant ideology or gradually becoming a part of it in his play, *Rhinoceros* (1959), an example of the Theatre of the Absurd. *Rhinoceros* as an allegorical play deals with the rhinocerosisation process of the characters who are slowly turning into pachyderms. In this study, brief relevant information about the Theatre of the Absurd will be therefore given; Eugène Ionesco as a playwright will be then introduced; and finally, the literal and metaphorical transformation process of the characters into rhinoceroses, which stands for the gradual loss of their individuality, will be discussed through specific references from the primary source and relevant secondary sources.

To start with, the Theatre of the Absurd does not look for a meaning in human existence, as life is absurd and lack of communication prevails. Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov and Jean Genet are among the most important representatives of the Theatre of the Absurd, as these playwrights deal with the concept of absurdity. Albert Camus, another influential figure, explains his insight into the concept of absurdity as follows:

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity. (Camus qtd. in Esslin, 2001: 23)

A familiar world can be clarified through reasoning; however, the individual might become a stranger due to the sudden loss of light and the dominance of illusion. This state is resembled to an exile by Camus since the memories of the homeland and the hopes of a promised land have vanished. These conflicts accordingly produce the feeling of absurdity.

Absurdity causes ambiguity and turns the world into an incomprehensible place. What happens on the stage is not easy to grasp due to the symbolic use. Martin Esslin in his article, “The Theatre of the Absurd” states that the spectators see “the happenings on the stage entirely from the outside, without ever understanding the full meaning of these strange patterns of events (1960: 5). Certain absurd scenes are presented on the stage, but these scenes might communicate various ideas and emotions, thereby arousing different feelings and opinions in the

spectators, who are “confronted with a grotesquely heightened picture of their own world: a world without faith, meaning, and genuine freedom of will” (Esslin, 1960: 6).

The Theatre of the Absurd highlights the sense of meaninglessness of life. Hence, the following characteristics can be seen in this theatre: “[W]ell-developed characters are replaced by interchangeable bodies and cartoon-like caricatures [...] the logic of everyday life is usurped by the alternative logic of the unconscious world of dreams and its surreal experience” (Morgan, 2010: 172). It is thus possible to come across unfamiliar characters and monsters in these absurd plays, as the order of everyday life is distorted. Furthermore, the surreal experiences and the world of dreams are represented, which provides a kind of escapism from real life. Eugène Ionesco as a playwright is influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd, the influence of which can be observed in *Rhinoceros*.

Eugène Ionesco (1909-1994) was born in Romania to a Romanian father and a French mother. Although he was born there, he spent most of his childhood years in France and returned to Romania in 1925. He lived in Romania for about 13 years and returned to France in 1938. Therefore, he had the chance to observe two different cultures. These two cultures enabled him to be introduced to various intellectual movements. Out of these movements, two currents influenced him to a great extent. He was “shaped by two overlapping intellectual currents which had in common a profound and perhaps overdeveloped aesthetic sensibility and an aversion towards the main tendencies of modern social life” (Morgan, 2010: 168). These intellectual currents are the Romanian Young Generation of 1927 and Le Collège de Pataphysique of 1948.

The supporters of the Romanian intellectual circle were attracted by avant-garde art, literature, and modernist forms of expression; therefore, they became isolated from the Romanian society and ended up becoming the supporters of the fascist Iron Legion (Morgan, 2010: 169). However, Ionesco resisted fascism and decided to return to France (where he was influenced by surrealism and dadaism) due to “the growing parochialism, anti-Semitism, and fascism in mid-1930’s Bucharest” (Morgan, 2010: 169).

As can be seen, Ionesco was affected by different currents. He had “a greater concern for the knowledge of reality,” as he questioned the nature of reality (Thomson, 1970: 62). *The Bald Soprano* (1948), *The Chairs* (1952), and *Rhinoceros* (1959) are some of his most known plays, in which the repercussions of those

currents can be seen. However, this study will focus only on *Rhinoceros* in terms of how the characters gradually turn into rhinoceroses, which are symbolically used in order to show that they become part of the totalitarian ideology in the play.

### **Rhinocerisation Process in *Rhinoceros***

*Rhinoceros* is set in a town square in a small provincial town in France. All the people besides Berenger, the protagonist, are transformed into rhinoceroses. The play starts with the meeting of Jean and Berenger. While they are having a drink, a rhinoceros passes, which surprises everyone except Berenger. Upon revealing his feelings for Daisy, Berenger is given advice by Jean who tells him to stop drinking. Meanwhile, another or the same rhinoceros passes. Then, Jean and Berenger start talking about what type of rhinoceros it is, Asiatic or African.

After a while, it is found out that people have turned into rhinoceroses. Berenger's friends, Jean, Botard, Dudard, and Mr. Boeuf are no longer humans, but have been transformed. Jean's transformation is, however, a gradual one, which Berenger observes. The places change throughout the acts and in the last act, the setting is Berenger's room. He is also afraid of turning into a rhinoceros since he becomes doubtful about his voice and appearance. Towards the end of the play, Berenger reveals his feelings for Daisy and they decide to live together; however, soon after, they become aware of the fact that they do not get along well with each other. Thus, Daisy departs him upon his slapping her and Berenger remains the only human. Despite the fact that he wants to join the rhinoceroses, he soon gives up his desire and decides to fight against them.

This brief plot summary offers an insight into the play as an absurd play. Some characters are unable to find meaning in life, whereas some others believe that they have found meaning by becoming a part of an ideology at the cost of losing their identity and personality. There is a lack of communication between several characters such as Berenger and Daisy. Although they seem to love each other, their opinions are not congruous. Berenger comments on the difference of opinion as follows: "I can see our opinions are directly opposed. It's better not to discuss the matter" (Ionesco, 1960: 105). Rather than trying to communicate and discuss the matter, he chooses to escape, which shows their lack of communication.

Absurdity prevails in the lives of these characters because what occurs surrounding them is not a usual experience. The solitude of man is put into the centre in that surrounding (Fowlie, 1960: 44). The more characters turn into

rhinoceroses, the stronger Berenger's feeling of solitude and loneliness gets. He decides to fight against them, but he seems to have lost the hope of a promised land. The experience presented in the play is surreal, as interchangeable bodies are represented through the transformation of the characters into rhinoceroses. The spectator is shown a grotesque picture of their own world in an absurd manner with an emphasis on the solitude of man.

The play can be also interpreted from a political and ideological perspective, as it has strong political and ideological associations, which can be revealed upon a close reading. In this respect, ideology plays a significant role in *Rhinoceros*. If transformation is taken to be of symbolic value, rhinoceroses stand for the individuals who adhere to a certain ideology. These rhinoceroses symbolise "a prior inner transformation of humans who believe that brute force can render them super-men and place them above the laws of nature, when in fact the only power they have is their strength in numbers" (Haney, 2008: 88). These individuals lose their distinctive features and are moulded in a one-sided way. Accordingly, Jean says: "Moral standards! I'm sick of moral standards! We need to go beyond moral standards!" (Ionesco, 1960: 67). He is not content with his current situation and ultimately becomes one of the rhinoceroses.

Regarding this transformation, Jean does not think negatively about the change when he talks with Berenger: "You always see the black side of everything. It obviously gave him great pleasure to turn into a rhinoceros. There's nothing extraordinary in that" (Ionesco, 1960: 66). This transformation gradually becomes normalised for the people. The line between normality and abnormality is therefore blurred. They cannot differentiate between the horns of the rhinoceroses, which shows that they are all the same now without unique traits. The ones that reject such totalisation become isolated. They are gradually tempted to become one of the rhinoceroses because the other characters have changed and look happy. Daisy hears harmonious melodies and happiness in rhinoceroses. She highlights her fascination by them as follows: "Those are the real people. They look happy. They're content to be what they are. They don't look insane. They look very natural. They were right to do what they did" (Ionesco, 1960: 103).

However, Berenger does not accept Daisy's perspective, and therefore gets lonely: "I feel out of place in life, among people, and so I take to drink. That calms me down and relaxes me so I can forget" (Ionesco, 1960: 17). He cannot connect with the other people because he does not feel home in his society. Hence, he drinks

alcohol, which he believes eases his memory. Those who have conformed to the dominant ideology seem to be happy, whereas those rejecting that ideology feel lonely and out of place, which might reflect Ionesco's "horror of mass civilization" (Strem, 1962: 158).

As can be observed, the world presented in the play is not peaceful and harmonious. It is under the influence of certain dominating ideologies, "erratic, unpredictable, and often peculiarly menacing" (Murray, 1962: 82). Indeed, the atmosphere of the small provincial town is chaotic and the animals give damage to the buildings by destroying them. The trumpeting of the rhinoceroses is felt throughout the play. In that rat race, some people are trying to escape, whereas some others become part of the herd mentality.

Berenger lives among such people who give up their personal perspectives and adopt the imposed ideology. Williams comments on these characters as follows:

Jean, a slave to appearance and habit and intellectual egotism; the Logician, devoted to logic in a world where logic can no longer explain anything; the Grocer and his wife, blinded by their petty materialism; the Old Gentleman and Dudard, the old and the young, both addicted to hero-worship in their quest for easy answers; Papillion, a believer in work for its own sake; [...] Botard the would-be social reformer, dominated by conceit, shallow abstractionisms and a childish concept of duty. (1962: 676-77)

These characters symbolise certain notions and values, and believe that they can free themselves from their present-day problems, but it does not seem possible, as they are under the strong influence of this mainstream ideology.

Thus, it can be argued that the joyful state of the rhinoceroses does not communicate the reality. They probably live in a dream and illusion. Their arguments are so strong for them that they believe in the hope of clinging to such an ideology. Valentine argues that "[t]he moral relativism and power-based monism of the rhinoceros movement are philosophical kitsch because the idealized [...] world they postulate is [...] a lie" (2011: 60). Thus, although rhinoceroses seem to be elated and harmonious, it does not portray the reality since they do not act as free individuals.

Furthermore, the play can be interpreted as an attack on the rise of fascism as well as other totalitarian ideologies. Dolamore points out that Ionesco's experiences in Romania are the primary source of *Rhinoceros* because the Romanian fascist group, the Iron Guard became stronger in parallel to Hitler's National-

Socialism in Germany that imposed its totalitarian will (1984: 27). In this respect, the play does not only touch on the loss of individuality, but it also touches on the rise of the fascist ideology in Romania. In this regard, Jean's obsession with health, his desire for strength, and his call for primordial state reflect the influence of the fascist ideology through its concern with its ideal of a natural and robust purity and the will to power (Dolamore, 1984: 29). Moreover, the rhinoceroses' green skins are symbolic in that they are "a reminder of the green shirts worn by the Iron Guard legionaries" (Dolamore, 1984: 30). Jean judges people "by the colour of their skin or the number of their horns" (Quinney, 2007: 45). As can be deduced from these remarks, it is evident that the play has strong implications about the rise of fascism and other similar autocratic ideologies.

It is difficult to pinpoint which rhinoceros has distinct, unique characteristics because after some time, they all become identical. Rhinoceroses are used as symbols of "moral corruption" and they are "unwieldy, brutish, ugly, armour-plated and with a fearsome horn jutting out from its nose" (Dolamore, 1984: 31). The feeling of transformation pervades because the conformist carries "the virus of rhinoceritis in him and lays himself open to the contagious power of ideological propaganda" (Dolamore, 1984: 32). Therefore, the power of ideology circulates and is transferred through certain institutions and discourses, which can be seen in Jean's and Daisy's words extolling the dominant power and ideology. This pervasive ideology causes an obstacle to the development of individuality. It arranges social life; however, the social organization in this context also implicates overall domination. The only escape from the world of the rhinoceroses is death.

The protagonist of the play, Berenger, however, rejects totalitarianism. In the face of his friends who have turned into rhinoceroses, he is determined to remain human. He does not give in to the grotesque transformation (rhinoceritis) and gives importance to the self rather than conforming. He falters between his desire to become one of them and his perseverance to remain human. This shows that he is "a product of embodiment which is ever-fluctuating" (Ekberg, 2011: 161). He says: "Oh, how I wish I was like them! I haven't got horns, more's the pity! A smooth brow looks ugly. I need one or two horns to give my sagging face a lift" (Ionesco, 1960: 106-7). He thinks of adopting the ideology of the masses, but then gives up the idea, thereby clinging to his own subjective viewpoint. Through Berenger, Ionesco might implicate that man is "the prisoner of his time," as he is very much influenced by his culture and time (Craddock, 1971: 22).

Ionesco presents universal themes in *Rhinoceros*. Although the play has local colour, it has also universal themes such as loss of identity, love, and blind or extreme adherence to an ideology. Therefore, it can be interpreted in a broader sense. Quinney comments on it as follows: “*Rhinoceros* can be read as an allegory for the Nazi Occupation of France, the cold war communist attitude of the Leftists in Paris, the French persecution of Algerians, and the incursions of Romanian youth into fascism in the 1930s” (2007: 50). Thus, the play is not restricted to one specific incident because its themes are universal, as it deals with the problems of humanity in general. Ionesco demonstrates that he is against all totalisations, on which he comments as follows:

When *Rhinoceros* was produced in Germany, it had fifty curtain calls. The next day the papers wrote, Ionesco shows us how we became Nazis. But in Moscow, they wanted me to rewrite it and make sure that it dealt with Nazism and not with their kind of totalitarianism. In Buenos Aires, the military government thought it was an attack on Peronism. And in England they accused me of being a petit bourgeois. Even in the new *Encyclopaedia Britannica* they call me a reactionary. You see, when it comes to misunderstanding, I have had my full share. Yet I have never been to the right, nor have I been a communist, because I have experienced, personally, both forms of totalitarianism. (Ionesco qtd. in Guppy, 1984)

His comments on the reception of the play reveals how it was perceived in different countries and cultures. Since it is open to various interpretations, it is rich in perspectives.

Through the discussion of rhinoceroses and Berenger, it is possible to argue that Ionesco does not support the ideology of the masses; on the contrary, he attaches importance to individuality. Lane reflects on this point as follows: “Ionesco values the individual and his freedom above all else and views society, especially bureaucratic mass societies, as an enemy. He deplores the dehumanization of modern society, in which individual is identified with his function” (1994: 22). Berenger is probably expected to embrace the totalitarian ideology like his friends; however, he resists and maintains his individuality. He says: “I’ll put up a fight against the lot of them, the whole lot of them! I’m the last man left, and I’m staying that way until the end. I’m not capitulating!” (Ionesco, 1960: 107). He becomes aware that he has nothing but his self-confidence in order to stand upright. Thus, as the last man, he keeps his guard up and is ready to struggle.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has discussed Eugène Ionesco's absurd play, *Rhinoceros* in terms of the process of rhinocerosisation, that is the gradual transformation of characters into rhinoceroses literally and metaphorically. The characters gradually turn into rhinoceroses and there remains only one character that is not transformed: Berenger. The process of rhinocerosisation is, thus, important in that it reveals how the characters slowly lose their unique characteristics and give way to the manipulative dominant ideology.

Through specific examples from the play and relevant secondary sources, it has been demonstrated that blind adherence to a dominant ideology is a threat to individuality. Such conformity may bring about the loss of individual traits and personal attributes. All in all, it can be pointed out that Ionesco does not promote or justify the attitude of the portrayed characters who turn into rhinoceroses, as it poses an obstacle to the flourishing of individuality, which shows the need to embrace a questioning and critical attitude in order to become truly free individuals.

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